



Posthumanism in Digital Culture

Cyborgs, Gods and Fandom

Callum T. F. McMillan

Digital Activism and Society



Posthumanism in Digital Culture

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Posthumanism in Digital Culture: Cyborgs, Gods and Fandom

BY

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United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80043-108-9 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-107-2 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80043-109-6 (Epub)



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Environmental
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ISO 14001:2004.

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Abstract

This work investigates the theories of transhumanism and posthumanism, the former dealing with radically changing bodies and minds, and the latter with the nature of humanity itself. It examines how these theories are rapidly growing and gaining more exposure in both today's media (specifically, video games and science fiction (SF) screen media, two likely platforms for such work), and the minds of their fans: the so-called 'geek fandom' that follows this type of media with a passion. The literature review lays the groundwork for this research, following the early days of humanist thought, the birth of 'anthropocentrism' and the history of transhuman and posthumanist thought from ancient times through to the modern day. In addition, this book tracks the ways in which video games and science fiction scholarship have developed, alongside research methods for both, in order to provide context to the case studies I have created: two for video games (*Xenoblade Chronicles*/*Xenoblade Chronicles X*) and one for SF screen (*EX_MACHINA*). Empirically, this work is triangulated with developer interviews and comments, together with the fan culture study, which provides the base for the primary research. This includes interviews with 'lay' fans and experts in various fields alike, which allowed for a great sample diversity. In fact, it is from the latter that the three key themes for this work emerge: 'body', 'identity' and 'power'. These themes allow for a unique theoretical framing of trans/posthuman ideology, analysing the depth of popularised themes. Ultimately, with SF as a powerful disseminator of themes and video games as an interactive, responsive medium, these two media types and the fandom surrounding them make an excellent case for the rapid growth of trans/posthuman ideas. Ultimately, this work provides a rich triangulated analysis on a constantly shifting and changing scholarship on the current state of popular culture, and especially that of fandom.

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Preface

The universe is cold. Fun is the fire that melts the blocks of hardship and creates a bubbling celebration of life. It is the birth right of every creature, a right no less sacred for having been trampled on since the beginning of time.

—Nick Bostrom

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Acknowledgements

I want to thank my supervisors, Professor Athina Karatzogianni and Dr Anna Claydon, for their support and advice during my time at the University of Leicester, making sure my studies were guided in the right direction, and providing me with opportunities to hone my skills.

I wish to thank my mother and late family members, who supported my selfish desires and made all of this possible by allowing me to pursue a life at university, which changed me forever.

And also, I wish to thank the various video game producers and film directors who have inspired me to take up this line of work, with special regard to Nintendo, who have provided countless irreplaceable hours of fun and entertainment.

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Introduction

The nature of humanity has ever been a changing one, redefining and reimagining itself over the centuries. As such, I have taken a particular interest in one facet of the various incarnations of ‘humanism’ that deals with the more extreme changes that the modern world can bring about – that of ‘transhumanism, which means to alter and improve the body (with technology and science), and its (sometimes) logical endpoint, ‘posthumanism’ (where humanity is distinct from its current incarnation). The two are sometimes used interchangeably by scholars, and the two often interact, but are distinct as being an ‘ongoing process’ (even ‘posthuman’ people can continue to change). Said philosophies deal with both the real and the fantastic, from the mechanical mixture of the cyborg to the abstract apotheosis of ideas like ‘transcendence’, which consider the furthest reaches of human imagination, as seen in works such as science fiction. Indeed, sci-fi works, both in the form of screen media (film, television, etc.) and video games will form the centre around which these ideas will be discussed and analysed.

That said, this work must have a space to fill in this vast field of research, and the academic world is no stranger to the fields of transhumanism or posthuman theory, with prolific scholars and philosophers such as Nick Bostrom (2003), Max More (2013) and others focussing heavily on it. Many others followed suit whose works will also be discussed as the book progresses. As such, where does this work sit in such a populated field? The answer to that can be found in the particular angle this work uses, using a particular set of case studies to enter an area relatively untouched by previous works – and that would be exploring transhumanism and posthumanism not only through the lens of the media discussed above but also through their fans.

Indeed, prior research has looked at all of these angles separately, but very rarely they are intertwined. For instance, as will be discussed in the literature review below, scholars have absolutely looked at the existence of trans and posthuman themes in sci-fi screen media (Campbell & Saren, 2010; Geraci, 2011; Hyeck, 2011; among others), in video game media (Cross, 2013; O’Gorman, 2015; among others), not to mention game technology itself being used as a transhuman tool (Baranowski & Buday, 2008; among others). Furthermore, studies into ‘fandom’ and how they interact with each other and their media works have naturally also been done before (Cristofari & Guitton, 2016; Dunlap & Wolf, 2010; among others), but this work seeks to accomplish something new to bring all of these together to study the effects and impacts that these philosophies have on their respective media texts and on the implications of how people think of these ideas as a whole.

My own research and personal life have been leading up to this point as well, as they have informed my own beliefs and passion for video games and game-based learning. Firstly, I've been an avid fan of not only science fiction works (which extends to the non-game theory and examples in this work) but also, of course, of video games. As long as I can remember, I've had a games console or handheld system in my hands, having played systems across all platforms, be they Nintendo, Sony or even Microsoft (in the form of PC gaming). So not only do I have a breadth of knowledge of how games work from a player's standpoint but also I have many friends who are computer scientists and even game developers in their own right, who have shared much of their knowledge with me as well – though, of course, I can't understand all of the technical specifics.

That said, when I went to the University of Hull to study media in 2011, I didn't have a particular goal in mind, but soon gravitated towards modules where my interests were most applicable – ultimately, this came to a head with the dissertation in third year, which in a sense served as a precursor to this work, as it too dealt with ideas of video games, but more in the sense of whether they had more merit as a gameplay (ludology) tool or as a storytelling (narratology) one – these terms will make themselves known later in this work, linking back to the past in a practical way.

Finally, I undertook a Masters in English Literature for a year – though this might at first seem irrelevant to this work, it was in the thesis for that degree that I first found an interest in science fiction literature and the idea of transhumanism/posthumanism – through looking at the work of classic authors such as H.G. Wells and scores of pulp magazines from decades past, I garnered an interest in the ideas of changing the body, and what this would do to people as well as society, so when I was invited to undertake a PhD at Leicester, I had a clear idea what I wanted to do, combining all I had learnt beforehand.

As such, what this research seeks to evaluate is the impact which this philosophy has had on the development of not only other scientific research but also on the media and the public consciousness. Visual media, video games and the fans that surround them are valuable informants and sources of information as to what the attitudes are on this changing world we inhabit – the vast new technologies and abilities that are quickly becoming available to us that, a century ago, likely could not have been dreamt up. As such, there is fear surrounding transhuman and posthuman theory; of the dangers that humans could cause by tampering with genetics, as well as the very real potential of an artificial intelligence (AI) rebellion should they become advanced enough, as depicted in films and verified by AI researchers, amongst others. As such, it stands as one of the major moral panics of this era when it comes to scientific progress, despite the benefits that some would stand to gain. Thus, the research question and aims are:

Research Question – How has the media transmitted and reproduced transhuman and posthuman ideas, and how removed are they from our current ideas of humanity?

Main Research Aim – To investigate the interactions transhumanism with the themes of the body, identity and power/agency when applied through different forms of media to their fans, via semiotics and themes of change, including body alteration, gender, race and more – ultimately concluding that the element of ‘humanity’ cannot be removed, and that despite physical change, humanism and anthropocentrism will be constantly reproduced.

Secondary Research Aim – To explore the growth of transhuman/posthuman ideas and themes throughout fictional media, with emphasis on film/TV and video games – the former being a more powerful disseminator of themes, while the latter focuses more on interaction and creation.

Based on the methodologies I describe later, a ‘twofold’ strategy has been used to construct the methodology for this work; firstly, a series of case studies of different media forms which clearly illustrates the difference in transhuman representation between passive and interactive forms through their agency and internal themes. The second form comes in the shape of combined ethnography and interviews, which allow interaction with fans and experts alike to discover how far these ideas have become integrated into society, while maintaining the classic facets of humanity. The interpretive framework used for these methodologies is a critical view of transhumanism that acknowledges the popular and progressive ideas that transhumanism embodies, while remaining distanced from wholly accepting it as gospel because of its history of being entrenched in the hands of the rich and powerful, which will work its way into the case studies and interviews alike.

The way I have contextualised this work stems from the multitude of texts I have explored, from sources from all through the previous and current century, both in my academic literature and my case studies alike, including those mentioned by my respondents in the interview-based sections for each of the chapters. That said, for my major three case studies, the video games *Xenoblade Chronicles* (2011), *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (2015) and the film *EX_MACHINA* (2015) were specifically chosen as the most connected thematically and the most recent or relevant (at the time the thesis on which this work is based began production in 2015). That said, works have been released since which continue this line, fittingly including *Xenoblade Chronicles 2* (2017), a sequel to the original *Xenoblade Chronicles*, and *Annihilation* (2018), another film by *EX_MACHINA*’s creator, Alex Garland, which also portray similar themes to those explored by this work.

Indeed, the theoretical background which informs this will become evident in **Chapter 1**, which serves as the literature review and goes over an extensive history of exactly how ‘humanism’ came to develop and change, eventually leading to ‘transhumanism’ and ‘posthumanism’ appearing. This begins with what are commonly known as the ‘Classical’ humanisms, starting with ‘liberal humanism’, also known as ‘renaissance humanism’ (Campbell, 1998; Kristeller, 1978; among others). After exploring how this movement, born in the 14th Century, reformed education and began a movement towards secularism in the western world, I

proceed towards exploring ‘secular’ or ‘social’ humanism (Melichar, 1983; Toumey, 1993; among others). This section discusses the spread of an even more secular variant focussing on what were perceived as ‘liberal values’ in the United States such as gay rights, sex education and birth control, but were restricted by conservative Christians in power, leading to the term ‘secular humanist’ being synonymous with ‘communism’ and ‘evil’, amongst other things.

Following this, I move on to more modern interpretations of ‘humanism’ and ‘humanity’. This section focuses on what is termed commonly as the ‘anthropocene’, the age of humanity and their effect on nature itself, and the concept of ‘anthropocentrism’, which describes humanity’s obsession with placing itself at the centre of the entire universe (Gottlieb, 2018; Parikka, 2017; among others). Here, we start to see the imbalances in power that this creates from the outset, with discussions of humans having dominion over all of nature and technology, and that humanist thought has led to the rich and powerful growing ever stronger (Gottlieb, 2018). Furthermore, we see that even when discussing the ideas of the ‘posthuman’, of something beyond humanity, the ‘human’ is something that will always be visible (Page & King, 2017b), with humanity having become ‘nostalgic for itself’ (Schönfellner, 2017). Indeed, Badley reinforces this through explicitly comparing transhuman thought to forgetting that at our base, ‘we are *also* creatures’ (Badley, 2018, p. 421), and we are built from our collective stories about ourselves, and our shared history – it defines who we are and how we see ourselves.

This neatly transitions into my next section, on the history and definitions of the terms ‘transhuman’ (to change and alter humanity and humanoid objects physically) and ‘posthuman’ (what remains after the most extreme changes, when humanity is redefined). Here, I introduce the work of Nick Bostrom (2003; among others), who discusses the history of humanity’s desire to change itself, from historic fables of humans and gods to the more modern science fiction tales. I supplant this with work from other authors on the subject (Ferrando, 2013; Hughes, 2012; among others), who discuss the reasons why people sought this out, from immortality to the more controversial and damaging practices, such as eugenics. Foster (2019) delves into the possibility that this may happen again if left unchecked, through there being an ‘implicit’ re-emergence of a ‘human ideal’ when trying to use genetic modification and therapy to remove illness and ‘weakness’ (p. 44) – which may instead bring about a harmful transhuman future – one where pandemics could become widespread because of a lack of genetic diversity.

Continuing into 20th Century thought, I discuss some of the subsets of trans/posthuman theory, such as Haraway’s (1987; among others) socialist and feminist bend on the popular ‘cyborg’ idea, fusing man (or woman) and machine to create something entirely new, as well as the ‘bioconservatives’ that emerged to counteract these radical new theories. Finally, I discuss the recent theory of ‘new materialism’ (Alaimo, 2012; Bryant, 2011; among others), which toys with the idea of agency and non-living objects and how no material can ever be truly ‘inert’, discussing cutting-edge technology, from drones to virtual pop idols.

With the base theories out of the way, the next literature sections focus primarily on the media forms I have chosen for this work, starting with literature

surrounding video games and their study (Apperley, 2006; Berger, 2002; among others). Said section details their history, their styles of use, the different types of video games that can appear and even different ways in which they can be used and applied practically (Baranowski & Buday, 2008; Kinder, 1993; among others) – the latter of which is particularly important when discussing the hybrid trans/posthuman and video game literature (Geraci, 2012a; among others). This section also includes discussions on gender and video games, which is also remarkable fluid and taps into the ‘transhuman’ fantasy perfectly. After having discussed video games, the next logical step would be to discuss my next main media source, that of science fiction (screen) media, discussing fan-favourite films such as *Star Wars*, series such as *Star Trek*, amongst many others. Starting from their humble beginnings as cheap pulp comics and stories in magazines, I discuss the history of Science-Fiction (SF) (Ashley, 2008; among others) and continue through to the inspirations behind the trans/posthuman creatures seen therein (Haynes, 2014; among others). In addition, I discuss the ethics and real life issues brought to the table by SF works (Pheasant-Kelly, 2015; among others), as well as themes of race and ‘otherness’ that SF, successfully or otherwise, brings to the table.

Media forms having been explored, the following section instead turns to the people behind these shows and games’ success – not just the developers or showrunners in this case, but the fans themselves. In this fan-studies literature review, I discuss first my interesting position of being an academic and fan (or ‘aca-fan’) (Cristofari & Guitton, 2016), which other scholars have observed in their own research, and how it can enhance, or indeed, even hinder my work. Next, I discuss the ideas of fandom both in reference to Japan’s media (Chen, 2012; Leonard, 2005; among others) as well as the fandom of video games (Geraci, 2012b; Postigo, 2008; among others), segueing nicely into the discussion of online fans and fan communities, video game-based or otherwise (Dunlap & Wolf, 2010; among others). Finally, I discuss the concept of fan conventions and societies, such as Comic-Con, observed in various countries and cities around the world (Jenkins, 2011; among others), and is the basis for a pilot study which helped develop my final fieldwork.

Finally, the literature review concludes with my theoretical framework, which informs my above-stated research aims, as well as my methodology. Said framework sees my ideas of trans/posthuman ideas being spread rapidly and widely around media and fandom alike split into three main interlinked sections: those of the ‘body’, ‘identity’ and ‘power’. I discuss the literature that has informed my framework in its three major parts, with ideas of the ‘body’ and ‘physical’ alteration forming the base ‘creatures’ and ‘transformations’ seen in the transhuman (Geraci, 2011; More, 2013; among others), the ‘identity’ issues that spring forth from said changes (Lee, 2016; Pedersen, 2016; among others) and the changing (or perhaps unchanging) ‘power’ dynamics that result from these new identities and bodies (Cerulo, 2009; Jones, 1996; among others).

Chapter 2 or the methodology chapter does exactly what its title suggests, detailing and giving background to the methodologies I use to conduct my fieldwork. I first discuss the methodologies I use which connect to previous science fiction scholars, including semiotics (Berger, 2011), using signs to explore the

ideas made present on the screen and in the sound of a given text, alongside the standard visual analysis (Cornea, 2011), textual analysis (Belsey, 2013; among others) and discourse analysis (Griffin, 2013). Next, I discuss video game-based methodologies, starting with discussing purely theoretical pieces (Apperley, 2006; Berger, 2002; among others), before exploring the use of ‘questionnaires’ (Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006), the exploration of ‘message boards’ online (Geraci, 2012a) and the exploration of video game mechanics themselves, such as ‘glitches’ (O’Gorman, 2015).

As such, I discuss my reasoning for choosing case studies as my primary source of research, using textual analysis and semiotic study for texts I selected as having great analytical potential. Following this, I give a brief synopsis of the games (*Xenoblade Chronicles/X*) and the film (*EX_MACHINA*) that I chose, of their basic plots, their genres and sub-genres, and their success in the general gaming/film market to ensure I had picked media texts that had truly ‘stood out’ to study at length. As for my secondary methodology, I select some examples of ‘fan-studies methodology’ such as ‘ethnomethodology’ (Berger, 2011), the exploring of online communities (Dunlap & Wolf, 2010), and observational study at convention sites (Jenkins, 2011) and discuss how they informed my short-lived pilot study during May 2016’s Comic-Con in London, where I had originally planned to interview fans there, but instead settled on interviews in a more mundane location because of the difficulties of reliably finding respondents with my resources at the time. Said interviews are the final topic discussed in my methodology chapter, and I discuss their nature, combination of face-to-face and ‘phone’ (Skype/Discord) interviews, semi-structured to improve the flow of conversation and allow for more natural and perhaps interesting and unexpected answers. The questions I use to start each discussion are also listed, as well as a discussion on how my respondents were chosen from various academic departments and fan circles to improve the range of answers. Finally, a table showcases the (anonymous) respondents, the general time and place of their interview and their occupation.

From here, the work is split into the three thematic chapters following the order of ‘body’, ‘identity’ and ‘power’, with each section showcasing the results of the case studies and the interviews, and how these media texts and their fans show just how ingrained trans/posthuman theory has become in popular culture. **Chapter 3** begins this process by looking at the visceral, the technological and everything inbetween with the ‘body’. *Xenoblade Chronicles*’ case study begins as most sections from here do with a quote from the late great Satoru Iwata and the developers of *Xenoblade*, which I feel helps contextualise and find a link between the ideas they discuss in their creations and mine. Here, I explore the themes of the cyborg, of body modification, and even transcendence and deification as they make themselves known in the narrative of *Xenoblade*, tying the instances of trans/posthumanism in not only the lore but also the gameplay of *Xenoblade*. This displays how both character and player become something ‘different’ as the game progresses, alongside all the transhuman beings that the player encounters. Next, I move towards *Xenoblade Chronicles X* and how it handles these issues compared to its predecessor. Despite using a more ‘hard sci-fi’ setting, I discuss the heavy

transhuman themes behind the replacement of the entire human race's bodies in the narrative with near-identical machines called 'mimeosomes', as well as the cataloguing of all organic life and how this technology is exploited and perverted as the plot continues. As far as gameplay ideas of bodily change are concerned, the use of robotic exoskeletons outside the already mechanical humans makes for a unique idea of which body, if either, can be considered 'real'. Next, I discuss the body in relation to *EX_MACHINA*, where the narrative revolves around the relationships between two humans, one outsider and one creator, and the latter's female-presenting robots, including Ava, who is also given very similar functions to a human, complete with a 'wetware' brain that is stated to be able to develop much like a 'real' human's brain. At the end of the chapter, I take the key samples from my interviews, complete with the most notable quotes and explore how many people recognised the ideas of trans/posthumanism, alongside the idea of bodily changes such as the cyborg and genetic modification (and how these could be applied practically), revealing potential alternate case studies that reveal just how much thought fans of all kinds give to these ideas.

Chapter 4, then, takes this theory one step further and considers what happens once the body has been changed, and how 'identity' can change after the fact. Returning to *Xenoblade Chronicles*, I discuss the identity crises brought about by the changes in not only the bodies of the characters but also the world(s) that they live in. In this case, they literally come to life and are disturbingly human in their shared origins, and the protagonist in particular is shadowed against the main antagonist, and have opposing views on how far a human or 'god' can be allowed to evolve. In the case of *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, identity is constructed again around the mechanised bodies of the cast, but the nature of humanity is called not only into question by this notion but also that of the revelation that they may not be able to change back. This is supplemented by a discussion about the gameplay of *X*, and how it allows players to choose their avatar's identity, as well as interact with other players in an online setting divorced from the game's main narrative, creating an interesting experience explored by a special interviewee I prepared. For *EX_MACHINA*, identity is explored through the claustrophobic experiences the main human character, Caleb has between his interactions with the robotic Ava. Identity issues with both sides doubting their 'humanity' make for an interesting theoretical dilemma, and the antagonistic robot designer Nathan serves as the intermediary, and his identity as the 'mad scientist' is also explored. Finally, the interview section discusses how respondents feel about the identity of being 'transhuman', and famous series such as *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell* are discussed, as well as the interesting 'cyberpunk' aesthetics and identities that come about as a by-product of these texts.

Finally, we have **Chapter 5**, which consolidates both the body and identity to discuss the 'power' relations that are created, or reconstructed, through said new identities. Returning one last time to *Xenoblade Chronicles*, I explore the extreme power wielded by the posthuman entities such as the 'god' Zanza and how the characters (and player) must 'level up' and improve themselves through modification of a kind to defeat their nemesis. As such, this chapter explores the gameplay elements of *Xenoblade* most closely, looking for instance at the 'skill

tree' system, which the player can dictate the 'evolution' of. For the 'power' dynamics of *Xenoblade Chronicles X*, I discuss, amongst other things, the motivation of the villain, who explores the lack of choice the 'weak' and 'poor' had in dictating their fate, of themes that very much mirror those in our world today. In addition, I explore the combat gameplay of *X*, and how it builds upon its predecessor by necessitating the use of extreme powers to combat extreme enemies, which tie in with the posthuman bodies that the characters in-game possess. *EX_MACHINA* sports instead more disturbingly realistic themes, with the aforementioned Caleb at odds with the antagonistic Nathan, who abuses his machine women and creates uncomfortable parallels to real gender and race related violence and power dynamics, which is played against said machines' desire to exercise their own power. My respondents in this case discuss the potentials for positive and negative use of technology and the posthuman, with a common 'doomsday scenario' simply involving capitalism controlling the reins of this technology as it becomes available, as is very much the case today.

The conclusion considers the future of trans/posthuman theory as well as the field as a whole. That said, one last interview-based section is dedicated to my research aim of showcasing the spread of these themes, and my respondents in turn discuss how and why they consume the media and use the technology they do, and how there is a fundamental difference between the processes of consuming screen media and video games, particularly when framed through the lens of trans/posthuman theory. Furthermore, I discuss the limitations of the research I have done, the missteps and problems I encountered along the way and instances in which my research did not fully contribute to my research aims. And finally, this chapter contains my own concluding thoughts for the book as a whole, and whether I believe I've thoroughly explored my research aims and my hopes for further research on the topics I've discussed in my years developing this work.

Then, without further introduction, the first chapter, the literature review, awaits on the next page; an exploration of humanity, 'humanism' and the 'trans/posthuman'.